

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001091

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARPI BERNIS AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: KUWAITI WOMEN'S RIGHTS: WEEK IN REVIEW

REF: A. KUWAIT 1016

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 991

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Indications continue to point toward Parliamentary approval of the GOK's draft bill granting women the right to vote. The Ambassador's contacts during the week shared their belief that women will be voting in the 2007 elections. Similar sentiments were heard on the diwaniya circuit. A second opinion poll this week showed Kuwaiti men's support for women's rights. A soon-to-be issued religious edict is to affirm the Amir's purview to rule on the suffrage issue. Even the GOK's opponents believe women will gain their political rights if the Government exerts sufficient pressure on the National Assembly. End summary.

Counting the Votes: Senior Officials Predict GOK Victory

[1](#)2. (C) During a March 13 meeting between the Ambassador and Energy Minister Ahmad Fahd Al-Sabah, the Minister declared that women's rights "100% will happen." He projected the current parliamentary breakdown at 32-31 in favor of the Government. Other officials have also pointed to an even split in the vote count. On March 15, an English-language newspaper reported that the Government is seven votes short of an simple majority of 33. Thirteen of 50 MPs have publicly announced support for the draft bill. Another ten MPs are officially undeclared. Fourteen of the 15 current ministers are anticipated to vote in favor; Justice Minister Ahmad Baqer, a Salafi Islamist, is the expected lone dissenter. Canadian and Italian diplomats speculated to PolChief that Baqer would be asked to resign so that he would not vote against the GOK. There has been no movement in that direction to date.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador on March 14 met Shaykh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, President of the National Security Bureau, who mentioned that the vote was turning into a big battle. Although it is a difficult issue, he added, there are positive indications that the Government will prevail. Regarding the Ambassador's public stance on women's rights, the Shaykh said that "everyone" knows the U.S. position, and no one would blame the Ambassador if he spoke out. However, he fell short of recommending a higher U.S. profile on the issue. Others with whom the Ambassador met this week all cautioned that U.S. re-statements of our well-known support for women's rights would likely be employed by those who argue that outsiders are imposing their will on Kuwait.

[1](#)4. (U) Kuwait TV and Al-Hurra Satellite televised a March 13 debate during which Salafi MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei stated his support for women's voting rights but opposition to women running for office, effectively confirming his "no" vote on the draft bill. Does he think the legislation will pass? "Absolutely not," he declared. In contrast, his fellow parliamentary opponents of the bill, MPs Marzouq Al-Hubaini and Mohammed Al-Busairi, agreed that the GOK will succeed as long as it continues to pressure the Assembly.

Fatwa to Permit Women's Rights

[1](#)5. (U) The Minister of Islamic Affairs announced that a fatwa would be issued March 19, affirming Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Sabah's prerogative to grant women the right to vote. The fatwa will acknowledge that Islamic scholars have differing views on the issue, and therefore the Amir must decide the matter. The new fatwa, which is expected to sway a portion of religious voters in favor of the GOK's position, will replace a 1985 edict that declared unequivocally that Islam forbids women from participating in the electoral process.

New Poll Confirms Men Support Voting Rights

[1](#)6. (U) Half of Kuwaiti men support granting full political rights to women according to an opinion poll published March 15 in an Arabic-language daily, mirroring a similar result from a survey of men and women (reftel A). Twenty-two percent of respondents back the woman's right to vote, but not to seek elected office while 28% of men oppose women's

participation in the political process. The poll included a random sample of approximately 2,000 men.

Women's Rights: Talk of the Town

17. (C) Women's political rights was the main topic of conversation during March 15 visits to several diwanis, drawing spirited discussion from attendees, most of whom agreed that the new law would be passed when voted on by the Parliament. Prominent columnist Abdulatif Al-Duaij insisted that expanding voting rights to Kuwait's female population was a logical and correct progression of Kuwait's democratic trend. When asked why the GOK had chosen to push for these rights now, he cited unspecified "foreign pressures" as well as a desire to avoid the embarrassment of not being seen as a leader in the Gulf. Another guest commented that recent developments -- voting in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the deaths of Arafat and Hariri and subsequent calls for political reform -- spurred the GOK to take action and not be left behind. Although one of the diwaniya guests did not agree with expanding voting rights to women, all agreed the GOK would spare no effort to get the law passed.

18. (C) Echoing what the National Assembly Speaker told the Ambassador on March 5 (reftel B), Deputy National Assembly Speaker Meshari Al-Anjari told Poloff at a diwaniya that PM Shaykh Sabah would threaten MPs with the dissolution of the National Assembly if members proved obstructive to GOK efforts to amend Kuwait's electoral law to expand suffrage to women. In the event of a dissolution, Al-Anjari said, the Prime Minister planned to have an Amiri decree issued granting women political rights (as was done in 1999) and calling for new elections. In a fait accompli, any new National Assembly would then be accountable to its new female constituents, making a repeat of the 1999 defeat of the Amiri decree unlikely. Al-Anjari said he expected the National Assembly to vote on the issue of women's political rights by "the end of April."

19. (C) Liberal MP Jamal Al-Omar spoke extensively with PolChief and Poloff about the prospects for the law. He said that although he supported the expansion of voting rights, he and other like-minded MPs were prepared for an inevitable short-term diminution of the power of progressive MPs should it be passed. He said that the rapid expansion of the voting base in his and other districts would leave progressive MP's scrambling to shore up the female vote, whereas Islamists, who are much more organized, could rely upon their women to follow their lead at the polls. Al-Omar predicted the first two election cycles after extending the franchise to women would be dominated by Islamists. Despite the short-term damage, he said, progressives in the National Assembly would support the law, which he characterized as "not popular," as a matter of principle. He opined that the GOK could pass the law now with a simple majority, but was working hard on undecided MPs so the legislation would pass with the broadest possible support. He discounted reports that the Prime Minister would ask the Amir to dissolve Parliament, but said a Cabinet reshuffle was possible and needed.

Uncle Sam behind Push for Women's Rights

10. (U) At a March 11 rally in Jahra, MP Mohammed Al-Busairi of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), Kuwait's version of the Muslim Brotherhood, attributed the GOK's renewed push for women's rights to an attempt to appease the United States. Al-Busairi said, "President Bush has recently praised all GCC states except Kuwait. This has motivated the Prime Minister and certain parties to move for approval of women's rights..." Meanwhile, ICM member Mubarak Sunaideh echoed a commonly heard refrain that the West is pressuring Kuwait to grant women's rights only 40 years after the country's founding even though most Western nations waited more than 100 years to extend universal suffrage.

Visit Embassy Kuwait's Classified Website:

<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/kuwait/>

You can also access this site through the State Department's Classified SIPRNET website

LEBARON